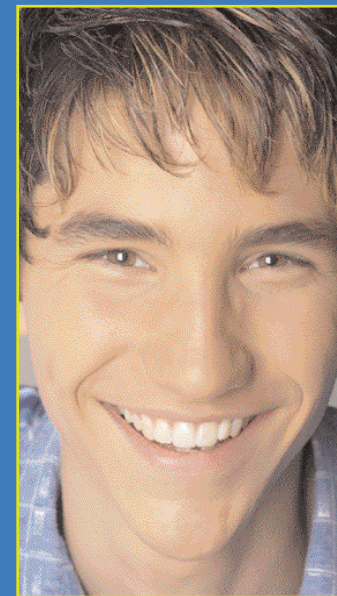


# Arizona High School Renewal and Improvement Initiative

A Report of the Regional Focus Groups on High School Renewal



Executive Summary,  
January 2005





## Use of the Recommendations

These recommendations were prepared for the Arizona High School Renewal and Improvement Initiative State Team as they develop their action plans to support high school renewal. It is important to note that the recommendations, as well as the supporting data, are the result of specific inquiries targeted to a small sample of public education stakeholders in the state of Arizona. Thus, though they are of great utility, they are limited in that they do not account for concerns and potential solutions that may not have fit within the framework of the focus group format. While focus group participants were given numerous opportunities to provide comments in different formats (large- and small-group discussions, written feedback forms, and post-focus group correspondence), time and the questions themselves necessarily limit the range of responses provided by participants. In addition, focus groups were comprised of fewer than forty participants per site. This provided each participant ample opportunity to engage in the conversations, but the focus group format does not lend itself to findings that are generalizable to the full population of stakeholders in Arizona. Participants' responses also reflect and are limited to their respective areas of expertise as they attempt to address direct questions.

Therefore, it is best to use these types of data and consequent recommendations as a foundation for action planning and as direction for further study, including the research of best practices and lessons learned in other fields. Going forward, the AZHSRI State Team and other supporters of education in Arizona should not be limited to the results of these focus groups alone, but should use these results creatively to forecast, strategize, and customize partnerships and action plans.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Arizona Department of Education, *Graduation Rate Study, 4 and 5 Year Cohort Class of 2002*, <http://www.ade.az.gov/ResearchPolicy/grad/20025yearGradReport.pdf>, accessed October 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Arizona Department of Education, *AIMS Report Wizard*, <http://www.ade.az.gov/profile/publicview/>, accessed October 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Arizona Department of Education, *AIMS Report Wizard*, <http://www.ade.state.az.us/profile/publicview/>, accessed January 2005.

# Executive Summary

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Arizona is poised to usher in exciting renewal activities in its high schools, which will help to ensure all students in Arizona achieve to high levels and graduate from high school ready for college, work, and success in life. A broad cross-section of school, community, and governmental leaders are looking at the performance of Arizona's high school students and are studying ways to improve the missions, organization, and results of Arizona's high schools.

There are many reasons why Arizonans believe high school renewal so critical. Most significant are hopes that more and more of Arizona's high school students will ultimately graduate and that they will graduate proficient in Arizona's content and performance standards. Only 76.4% of students starting high school in the fall of 1998 graduated by spring 2003. 33.6% of Arizona's Hispanic students in that cohort did not graduate in five years, 37% of Native American students did not graduate; and 29.8% African American did not graduate in five years.<sup>1</sup> Further, there is not general consensus that each of those students who did graduate was well prepared for a competitive economy or post-secondary education.

In an effort to ensure all of Arizona's high school students achieve to the standards, the Arizona State Legislature recently authorized an assessment and accountability system, which requires all students to pass Arizona's Instrument for Measuring the Standards, or the AIMS test, in order to graduate. The class of 2006 is the first class that will be required to pass AIMS to graduate. In the spring 2004 administration (the first opportunity the class of 2006 had to take the test, which was when they were sophomores), 59% of that class who took AIMS without accommodations passed the reading portion, 62% passed the writing portion, and 39% passed the mathematics portion of the AIMS assessment.<sup>2</sup> In the fall 2004

administration, students were retested in areas where they underperformed. 36% of the class who took the reading "retest" passed, 46% of 11th graders who took the writing retest passed, and 22% of the class who took the mathematics retest passed.<sup>3</sup>

Statewide concern that all students ultimately pass the AIMS test by 2006 is creating conditions for real renewal to occur in Arizona's high schools. Arizonans across the board are eager to change—and they are ready for a legitimate group of stakeholders to provide leadership in identifying strategies for renewal that schools, school districts, and communities can join together to undertake.

To help provide that leadership, the Arizona Department of Education convened a statewide team to study the high school context in Arizona and to develop action plans for high school renewal. After their first full meeting in the summer of 2004, the State Team determined they needed to conduct a needs assessment of stakeholders from across the state in order to determine the unique Arizona context for improving high school. In response, the Arizona Department of Education and WestEd joined to organize four Regional Focus Groups on High School Renewal. The Focus Groups were held October 14 in Yuma, October 15 in Tucson, October 18 in Flagstaff, and October 19 in Phoenix. The Focus Groups were convened to advise the Arizona High School Renewal and Improvement Initiative State Team on a number of key topics:

- what matters most to the many diverse stakeholders unique to Arizona;
- what are the expectations for student performance within the schools and the broader community;
- what students need in order to be successful in high school;
- what ideas for renewal hold promise or are at peril; and
- how ready the schools and communities are to take on high school renewal initiatives.

One hundred and eleven stakeholders took part in the focus groups, representing a diverse array of interests, including those of students, parents, teachers, principals, administrators, elected officials, business and industry, higher education, and middle level education; charter schools, alternative schools, and regular comprehensive high schools; and urban, suburban, and rural schools. These stakeholders joined together to advise the AZHSRI State Team on the development and implementation of an action plan for high school renewal.

## Recommendations

Following are key recommendations based on analysis of the Focus Group results. It is important to note that focus group participants did not vote on recommendations for the State Team; instead, the following recommendations are offered by the researchers, based on the themes and comments that emerged out of all of the focus group sessions. The full report, which contains detailed listings of the comments made, can be accessed at [www.ade.state.az.us/asd/AZHSRI/default.asp](http://www.ade.state.az.us/asd/AZHSRI/default.asp).

## Outline of Recommendations to the Arizona High School Renewal and Improvement Initiative State Team

January 2005

### I. Clearly and Convincingly Justify High School Renewal

- A. Define Arizona's expectations for high school students in a clear, concrete vision statement
- B. Include in the vision statement the expectations Arizona has for its high school graduates, including proficiency in core content areas, the arts, and citizenship; preparation for the workforce, higher education, and life in general; and the ability and desire to engage in lifelong learning
- C. Develop action plans with short-term "quick wins," medium-term actions, and long-term changes
- D. Identify and include in the action plans resources for high school renewal, including partnerships and opportunities for collaboration with stakeholders and allies
- E. Identify and include in the action plans messages that motivate the public and make the case for renewal
- F. Present the vision and action plans in a continuous improvement mode

### II. Ensure All Students Have Access to a Rigorous, Relevant, Comprehensive Curriculum

- A. Ensure the curriculum is well-rounded—and rigorous
- B. Learn from, encourage, and expand Career and Technical Education
- C. Recognize and address the importance of student motivation

### III. Improve Instruction

- A. Improve teacher preparation
- B. Improve teacher professional development
- C. Use knowledge about adolescent development in instructional strategies and plans for school organization
- D. Change the professional culture of school communities

### IV. Reduce the Number of Students Who Drop Out Early

### V. Diagnose Potential Resistance to Change and Address as Required

### VI. Ensure AIMS is a Sustainable Instrument for Improvement

- A. Continuously inform the public about AIMS
- B. Analyze AIMS results and publicize findings
- C. Help students to pass AIMS